

News from Ed Markey

United States Congress

Massachusetts Seventh District

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MARKEY SLAMS NUCLEAR WEAPONS LAB SECURITY

Lawmaker notes terrorists could construct, detonate dirty bomb or homemade nuclear bomb onsite

WASHINGTON, D.C. --

Today Representative Edward J. Markey (D-MA), a senior Member of the Energy and Commerce Committee and co-chair of the Bipartisan Task Force on Nonproliferation, released a letter to Department of Energy (DOE) Secretary Spencer Abraham regarding lax security at DOE nuclear weapons facilities such as Los Alamos National Laboratory, Rocky Flats Environmental Technology Center near Denver, and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. He also released a letter to Brent Scowcroft, who is currently preparing a report on security of DOE nuclear facilities for the Nuclear Command and Control Group at the National Security Counsel, asking that an unclassified version of the report also be prepared and publicly released.

"Mock 'terrorists' were able to access the weapons grade uranium and plutonium in security tests (force-on-force exercises) at DOE facilities more than 50% of the time," Rep. Markey stated. "Experts have told me that a group of suicidal terrorists could, once inside the facility, quickly build and detonate a dirty bomb or a homemade nuclear bomb capable of achieving explosive critical yield."

Ten DOE sites, some of which are located near urban areas such as Denver, Colorado and the Bay Area of California, contain enough weapons-grade plutonium (reportedly about 10 kg is required) and highly enriched uranium (reportedly about 50 kg is required) to build a crude nuclear bomb. In addition, the DOE Transportation Security Division regularly transports nuclear weapons materials on public highways from site to site. Recent press reports have detailed both Al Qaeda members' attempts to obtain nuclear materials as well as their desire to attack U.S. nuclear facilities.

Representative Markey's letter to DOE questions issues related to numerous security problems at DOE facilities:

- In more than 50% of force-on-force exercises conducted to assess the adequacy of security at DOE's nuclear facilities, mock "terrorists" were reportedly able to penetrate the facility and gain access to plutonium or uranium. Had these been real attacks, suicidal terrorists might have been able to use the plutonium or uranium to quickly construct and detonate "dirty bombs" which could spread radioactive materials over a large area, or "homemade nuclear bombs" which could achieve the same explosive force as a small nuclear weapon.
- Storage vaults and vault-type rooms used to store weapons grade uranium and plutonium, some of which are reportedly constructed out of drywall, may not be adequately protected against impacts from large commercial aircraft or the detonation of large truck bombs nearby. Vaults containing weapons-

grade plutonium or uranium have been found left unlocked and open for 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, at some DOE sites.

- The Design Basis Threat, which are regulations that set security levels for DOE facilities, may not reflect the type of threat we now know to be realistic: It only requires that the facilities protect against a small group of attackers, it does not assume that the attackers may have access to sophisticated weaponry, including chemical and biological weapons, and it may not protect against very large truck bombs such as those that have been used in other terrorist attacks.
 - Rather than reward employees for bringing security flaws to the attention of their superiors, DOE has a long history of retaliating against such whistleblowers.
 - DOE management has been ignoring Presidential, General Accounting Office, Congressional, internal DOE, and independent expert critical reports on security of its facilities for decades. DOE continually fails to allocate sufficient resources to security, and continually fails to oversee security at its facilities to ensure that it is adequate. DOE personnel have been found to have improperly altered security ratings to make it look as though security was better than it was.
- "DOE has been ignoring expert critical reports on security of its facilities for decades, and as a result we are all at risk. This has never been acceptable, and it is even less so given the events of September 11," said Rep. Markey.

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